

The 4Rs of harmonious living

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Article

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EID-UL-MUBARAK, or better known locally as Hari Raya Aidilfitri, the festival to end the holy month of Ramadan, will be celebrated this week.

As we approach the festivities, we are reminded of the two Singaporean bloggers who posted on the Internet what the island's deputy public prosecutor called "highly inflammatory and insulting" remarks.

Maybe it is appropriate to revisit the incident and see what lessons can be learnt from this unfortunate but important episode.

The duo had admitted to making the seditious remarks on the Internet in response to a letter in The Straits Times (June 14) where a woman with a Muslim-sounding name wanted to know whether uncaged pets (not just dogs) are allowed in taxis.

In fairness, her concern was more about cleanliness.

Seemingly, this is where it all started. Feeling "provoked" by the suggestion, one of the bloggers acted "childish and stupid", to quote one of the defendant's lawyer, towards Muslims in general.

In mitigation, the bloggers claimed they had many Muslim friends and they were not racists.

In fact, some of the friends reportedly were in court to lend support to the claim. One even wrote a letter to prove the point to the court.

All this may be well and good but it did not change the impact of the remarks, which the judge called "particularly vile".

The fact is, the remarks were posted on the Internet and had its effect on Muslims internationally.

The issue was not localised any longer.

Worse, it could be deemed as a beginning of a hate campaign by those who are racially intolerant.

In this regard, Britain just passed a law against inciters of religious hatred in June indicating how venomous such acts can be even in a so-called matured democratic society.

Britain should know because it was once a global colonial master with many "friends" who were coloured by the practices of colonialism.

Colonialism bred racists who stayed long after the colonial days.

White supremacy, for example, is still very much alive today, although in many cases it is subtle and well concealed.

Be that as it may, it only goes to show that having "friends" of different cultural or religious backgrounds does not mean one cannot be a racist, especially when these "friends" mean exactly just that, in the most superficial way.

To the bloggers, the friendship reportedly was limited, to what is termed as the "privilege of enjoying their hospitality during festive and family occasions".

The friendship did not extend to beyond these happy occasions.

And, thus, the apparent "failure" to understand, less still fathom, what the Muslim attitude would be in certain issues, in this case with regard to dogs in particular, and animals in general.

Their apparent ignorance complements the "highly inflammatory and insulting" and "particularly vile" weblog.

On the contrary, if someone actually understands a Muslim's position on dogs, the response to the same letter in The Straits Times could have been more measured and objective. Sadly, this was not the case.

The bottom line is, of course, the bloggers (at least one of them) cared more for dogs than Muslims to react the way they did.

And this is the point of contention, especially in a globalised world where cross-religious understanding and cultural pluralism are increasingly vital components.

If one is really genuine about it, someone can easily find out that Islam has a special attitude towards animals, not only dogs. It strictly prohibits cruelty to animals, and enjoins the protection of their well-being.

There are several hadith (saying and actions of the Prophet Muhammad). A notable one is the narration that the Prophet, when he wanted to perform his prayers, preferred to cut part of his garment on which a cat was sleeping, rather than wake up the animal.

One narration on dogs relates what the Prophet said of the virtue of saving the life of a dog by giving it water and quenching its thirst.

In one case, someone-filled his shoe with water from a well and gave it to a dog whose tongue was lolling in thirst.

For this deed, he was granted the ultimate reward: eternal Paradise (see http://www.crescentlife.com/spirituality/animals_in_islam.htm).

These Should illustrate that Muslims are animal-friendly, to say the least, but perhaps in different ways, with clear definitions as to what the limits are.

And these limits should be respected.

Undoubtedly, Muslims can be insensitive to other cultures, especially with respect to food.

While they want their dietary restrictions to be respected, some forget that others, too, have dietary restrictions, for example, serving beef in the presence of Hindus.

In short, all round, the stumbling block has more to do with ignorance of the different cultures and beliefs.

And, thus, when confronted with a "slightly different" situation, rather than trying to understand the issue, we turn into loose cannons that could exacerbate the differences further.

So, what's the lesson learnt? In order to prevent a globalised society turning into just a cliché, at least four operative words must be mustered — restraint, respect, resourcefulness and reciprocity.

By restraint, we mean avoiding being callous and careless, especially in matters we know we are ignorant about. Rather, it is better to treat each situation with sufficient respect and preserve harmonious relations so that it will not deteriorate further.

Respect means to know the limits of what is possible and what is not, in terms of each culture, including beliefs.

Take active interest in what is minimally acceptable before it becomes offensive to the other party, more so friends.

Last, but not least, is reciprocity. Remember, do not unto others that you would not have them do unto you.

This is a good rule of thumb in promoting cross-religious understanding and cultural pluralism.

Unless we take the trouble to be skilled in the 4Rs, there is little hope for a more meaningful sharing despite the many festive seasons.

This effectively reduces our globalised world (including the blogosphere) to one of dog-eat-dog.

Wishing all Hindu readers a Happy Deepavali, and our Muslim readers Selamat Hari Raya Aidilfitri.

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